

Mark Tucker's Tough Choices or Tough Times –

A Response by Mark Simon

Tom Mooney Institute for Teacher and Union Leadership
2121 K Street, Suite 260, Washington DC 20037
202-496-8366 sim@gwu.edu

To work in public education today is to choose a career in the line of fire. Only those who are prepared to fight for what is right and against the pressures to compromise the best educator judgment should be encouraged to apply. The fact is that policy makers have failed us and our students. Educators have been asleep at the switch. We not only need a workforce of the best and brightest, but teacher unions willing and able to step up and champion dramatic changes in how schools and school systems operate. The past decade of reforms have *not* improved the quality of teaching and learning, in spite of new knowledge about how children learn and a growing consensus that all students can learn at high levels.

Enter, Mark Tucker's new Commission Report, Tough Choices or Tough Times. Its bold critique is now getting the close attention of those same policy makers in Congress and state legislatures who were perhaps too receptive to the teacher-proofing, standardizing proposals of the recent reform era.

I've been a K-12 classroom teacher and teacher union president for the past 30 years, and co-direct the newly formed Mooney Institute for Teacher and Union Leadership (MITUL) which works with teacher union locals helping them to be bold advocates of progressive education reform. We've had a particular interest in how we retain, utilize and reward the most accomplished teachers.

We want to focus here on whether the prescriptions in Tough Choices or Tough Times will really improve the quality of teaching and learning for all students, or whether they will move us further away from that goal.

From our perspective this report gets several important things right.

1. First, it argues that we need to attract the best, the brightest, the most creative teachers into K-12 education to maintain a world-class public education system. Current salaries and working conditions work against attracting new teachers from among the top rung of college graduates, and if that continues, the decline of the system will follow.
2. Second, it suggests that the process of schooling – the learning goals and accountability measures we have in place – are failing to motivate students to take tough courses and work hard and may be wrong, warping the whole enterprise downward. Scoring high on the current batch of “in the box” tests is in conflict with world class schooling. On page 14 and again on pp. 28-32 the report outlines the skills that world class schooling should be aimed at: *“creativity and innovation, facility with the use of ideas and abstractions, the self-discipline and organization*

needed to manage one's work and drive it through to a successful conclusion, the ability to function well as a member of a team," "not just being able to do math well but being very good at mathematical reasoning," "cultural awareness," "mastery of the arts and humanities," and "history, music, drawing, and painting," – that both students and teachers need to be creative, high-level knowledge workers. We think that's right. This description is even more relevant today, but it is not new. Linda Darling-Hammond's National Commission on Teaching and America's Future made similar points in 1997.

3. Third, it recognizes that growing inequality in society impacts achievement in school and calls for wrap-around services to address social and economic inequality, equalization of education funding, and
4. It recognizes the need for quality pre-school for all children and a significant investment in those early years, particularly for the neediest children.

Much of the eloquent critique of the current system listed as “a few facts” on page 8-9 of the Executive Summary we agree with. The education system was built for another era, and the system tends to reward both students and teachers for putting in time, rather than attracting and rewarding the best teachers.

But then the report makes a large, and largely unsubstantiated, leap. The report argues that:

1. The United States is paying more for public education than every other country, the current system is full of waste, and so the infusion of funding that is needed to fix the current system is not politically salable.
2. Over the past 40 years American public education has tried “every conceivable programmatic solution,” but they all amounted to a lot of tinkering at the edges because the core structures and organization of schooling hasn't changed.
3. A new system is needed.
4. The prescription in the Tucker Commission's solution is a new system that is public in name because public money finances it, with state bureaucracies and local Boards granting charters and enforcing quality control, but
5. In the Tucker commission's new system, schools will be run by *privately* chartered entities overseen by private “helping organizations.”

What we need is *not* a new system based on flawed assumptions about the efficacy of the private marketplace, but a system guided by the wisdom of educators. In the past decade, the voice of teachers has been absent. That fact speaks volumes about the theory of change – the strategy – of the reformers. Reforms that also dis-empower the key actors, teachers, have bred cynicism, and have failed to unleash the creative energy of the profession.

The key “Tough Choices” prescriptions take us in the wrong direction. They essentially sidestep the issue of how to get us better teaching and learning to world class standards, because, at their core, they are not about improving the quality of teaching and learning in our schools. They focus instead on who should administer public education.

But, why should we have confidence that the commissioners and the staff who wrote this report, or the “contract schools” and “helping organizations,” or the state bureaucracies, all of whom are empowered in it, really understand good teaching and what good teachers need?

Marc Tucker has certainly had an extraordinary career in education policy. His labors launched the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards-NBPTS and the accountability based standards movement, and so he brings a lot of credibility to the critique he offers in this report that relates to the quality of teaching and learning in the US. It should be noted, however, that Marc Tucker and the Commission staff are not neutral or disinterested parties in the prescriptions they offer. Mr. Tucker is vice president for “Americas Choice,” a project of the National Center on Education and the Economy, which is a provider of a particular curriculum and professional development package for sale to school systems. America’s Choice would qualify as a “helping organization” in the system the report recommends.

So it is entirely too convenient that the Tucker Commission rushes to a private provider scenario and ignores the details of what a rich professional growth system looks like -- one that would build the repertoire of strategies and skills that teachers need to unlock the creative and innovative talents of kids. The commission rushes to the somewhat self-serving conclusion that existing public school administrations are not up to the task of creating schools as learning communities that welcome and empower the best and brightest teachers.

And it is equally concerning that the report refrains from analyzing what has caused many public school systems to detour from a focus on teaching quality and rich curriculum. The fact is that the current high-stakes accountability agenda has systematically steered existing public school systems away from establishing richer professional growth systems or curriculum that is broad, rich, and develops creative habits of mind. The irony is that the “professionalization-of-teaching” movement was poised to focus on exactly these things ten years ago when the standards movement was hijacked, in part in response to Marc Tucker’s 1990 Skills of the American Workforce report.

Indeed, this new Tucker Commission report is filled with contradictions.

1. **On Bureaucracy** – the report bemoans the “separation of the responsibility from the power” in the current system. But then, ironically, the Report’s fictional 2021 Scenario moves the bureaucratic monitors, credentialers, and standard setters even further away from the world of teaching and learning. Teachers in schools become implementers of systems decided by people far removed from the teaching process – state bureaucrats and helping organization staff. The bureaucracy will be more bureaucratic.

In the Montgomery County Public School System(MCPS), where I was the union president for 12 years, the union proposed and we negotiated programs to involve the most accomplished classroom teachers in the process of peer review, staff development design,

curriculum writing and monitoring, and support for quality instruction. We have been elevating the most accomplished teachers to roles as instructional leaders. The Commission recommendations move the quality control function to a much more distant state level of pure bureaucracy – even less accountable and in-touch with the doing.

- 2. On Attracting the Best and the Brightest** – the authors bemoan the inadequate teacher compensation systems in place, systems that fail to attract from among the top half of college students. On the other hand, the authors seem to think that the teachers we want to attract won't be able to do the math to see that the cut to their pensions, or those of future teachers, isn't worth the salary bump. The authors want creative, professional educators with skills that can only be honed over time, but the report advocates structuring the salary and benefits in a way designed to attract short timers not really committed to a long career in teaching. Starting salaries do need to be raised, and pay schedules could be more creatively applied to create career ladders so that teacher leaders can stay in the classroom, be instructional leaders and have careers with leadership roles. But the solution will not be revenue neutral. It is about building human capital. A decent pension is part of the package that gets teachers to stay and devote their careers to investing in their knowledge and skills. Paying for front-end salary blips by simultaneously cutting the very pensions that help teachers decide to stay for a long career, is a strategy that shows this report isn't focused on building human capital over the long haul.

Among progressive teacher union leaders, we believe that great teachers are made, not found. Great teaching is less about the charisma you walk in with than what you know and are able to do. There is a clear knowledge base, a long learning curve. Becoming a great teacher is a never-ending process of learning—building a broad repertoire of skills so that the artful decision of what strategies to pursue with each child can benefit from that great skill. That is the philosophy that underlies the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Proposals to sacrifice pension for starting salary imply a model of who we are trying to attract that is in conflict with a profession with a long learning curve.

- 3. On Leveling-up Quality Schooling to Needy Students** – the report claims a goal of serving poor and disadvantaged students better, by eliminating neighborhood schools and turning all schools into “contract schools” overseen by private “helping organizations” who are then incentivised through a pupil-weighted formula to accept disadvantaged students. This proposal – that the whole system will be “leveled-up” if schools compete for and select students who apply individually – defies history. It defies reality. The market has proven to be the worst way to get needed services to poor and disadvantaged clients. There is no precedent, no research base, no human experience that says that private contractors establishing profit-making enterprises is the best way to get services to the neediest citizens.

Parents prove, in my experience, to be poor consumers of education, whether in the District of Columbia Public Schools(DCPS), where my daughter is in public school and where there is one of the highest number, per-capita, of charter schools in the nation, or in more privileged MCPS where I taught. I have watched parents make bad decisions as

education consumers, based on imperfect information, and poor understanding of what constitutes a good education.

- 4. On Accountability through Testing** – the Report acknowledges that: “*many of our accountability tests ask students to identify the one right answer from a list of possible answers to the test question. That is literally the answer in the box. But what we need is the out of the box answer, the one that did not occur to the framer of the test.*” And the report also acknowledges: “*the dangers inherent in proposing a system even more dependent on examinations than the one it hoped to replace.*” The fact is that there are no tests that measure “out of the box” thinking, yet the report blithely says these tests will be the linchpin to the new system. We are not anti-testing, but we do take seriously the difficulty of developing these much better tests, and also the need to make sure education is more than test-prep. There need to be multiple measures of achievement, and not the single high-stakes instruments called for in this report.

In Montgomery County we watched the MSPAP performance based assessment get replaced by the multiple-choice CRT, but both were driving short-cut test prep, rather than good teaching. Nebraska somehow got permission from the US Dept. Of Ed to have their performance based and teacher designed and graded tests satisfy the NCLB accountability standard, but that effort now seems to have been deemed unworkable in the current accountability environment. Coming up with a standardized test that eliminates teacher judgment, measures creativity, innovation, and problem-solving, remains a leap of faith in this report.

On Collective Bargaining and the Role of the Union – the report eliminates one party in the collective bargaining process, the local Board of Education. It asserts that collective bargaining agreements over wages and working conditions will be negotiated with the state. But the lack of attention to the details of how this could possibly happen leads us to suspect that the recommendations are really an attack on collective bargaining. Collective bargaining, as we know it in its best incarnation, has to do with a lot more than salary schedules, hours and working conditions. Where teachers are engaged through their union in creating professional teaching and learning conditions, it can be a tool to negotiate peer review, professional growth systems, teacher induction systems, alternative pay plans and teacher instructional leadership roles.

Investing in Human Capital –

If the commission had been interested in human capital, teacher quality and teacher working conditions, it would have taken an interest in the good research on what will attract the best and brightest to want to teach in needy schools. This issue has been studied extensively and there is little mystery about it. For example, a large study by Julia Koppich and Daniel Humphrey from SRI looked at what would draw National Board Certified Teachers to low performing schools, and together with a similar study by Barnett Berry, a clear picture emerged about what’s behind the recruitment and retention issues. The Tucker report, on the other hand, seemed to begin with an ideologically-driven desired-

state scenario aimed at “cutting local school system bureaucracy” and replacing it with private providers.

Barnett Berry’s Center for Teaching Quality surveyed teachers in five states and interviewed National Board Certified Teachers about what would attract them to want to teach in a high need school. The resulting factors accomplished teachers look for are:

- Strong principals who take administrative burdens off teachers
- A professional environment where teaching expertise is valued, not one where scripted learning is prescribed
- Professional resources (classroom libraries, science equipment, current technology)
- Colleagues who are also skilled and accomplished and time to collaborate with peers
- Smaller classes so they can get to know their students and families
- Professional development in leadership skills, team building, and cultural competence.
- Salary incentives to teach and stay in a high need school – but a salary boost without addressing the other professional conditions gets dismissed as insufficient

All of these would have been fruitful avenues for recommendations. In the studies I have seen on the subject of how to attract and keep the most accomplished teachers, there is no reference to “bureaucracy.” So I am curious to see the data that led to the rather self-serving conclusion in the Commission Report, that streamlining bureaucracy and opting for private providers is the key.

This report correctly identifies problems but points in the wrong direction. In the end, it reads more like an ideological treatise than a research-based analysis. Powerful research that conflicts with the report’s recommendations is not acknowledged. The report fails to make a research-based case for its major prescriptions. Instead, it offers a “pie-in-the-sky” prescription reinforcing “nothing left to lose” cynicism. The report reinforces a dangerous agenda of privatizing, pension cutting, and abandonment of neighborhood-based public education, putting the very system of public education at risk.

Dramatic changes *are* needed but they are changes in the teaching force and what teachers know and are able to do. The status quo *does* need to be up-ended, but let’s make sure that the gate keepers for the new system are not the same ones who brought us the failed last attempt at “standards based reform” and “No Child Left Behind,” for which Mr. Tucker’s first Report of the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce in 1990 bears at least a piece of the responsibility. The 2007 Tucker Commission has opened up a serious conversation about the purpose of public education and the need for bold reform. The issues deserve more serious attention by educators than this report provides.